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ABSTRACT

Life is more complex than ever for adults in the 21st century as a result of technological advances; the changing nature of work, workplaces, and working relationships; international economic competition; the changing demographics of workers, families, and communities; and longer life spans. Learning to cope with all these changing responsibilities and roles constitutes "the hidden curriculum of adult life." A selection of adult education approaches can be used to help individuals negotiate the curriculum of life challenges. In the 1990s, work-life balance was in vogue, with programs aimed at helping people cope by developing skills in communication, interpersonal effectiveness, and life management or family-career management. The framing of imbalance as a problem and balance as the desirable and achievable alternative suggests that there is an ideal and that our attempts to live up to it are deficient. But who gets to define what work-life balance is? Newer approaches to adult education suggest that instead of merely informational learning, adult education should be transformational. Equipped for the Future (EFF) is one framework developed to help adults integrate their learning in four categories: communication skills, decision-making skills, interpersonal skills, and lifelong learning skills. An Australian framework also takes a transformative approach, with key principles including multiplicity, connectedness, critical intelligence, and transformation. Working toward integration requires transforming our perception about life roles. Transformative learning involves questioning our assumptions and a fundamental rethinking of premises. We need to draw on what we know and how we know it in order to handle the demands of contemporary life. (Contains 14 references.) (KC)

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The Balancing Act of Adult Life

by Sandra Kerka
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Life in the 21st century seems more complex than ever, as adults cope with the demands of multiple roles, the stresses of a fluid workplace, and the pressures of child and elder care. Individuals feel compelled to update their work-related knowledge and skills and to keep up with the proliferation of information. Family resource management is increasingly complex, with expanded choices and decisions that must be made about utilities, banking, investments, retirement planning, etc. The Internet has simultaneously made it easier to access information, yet more complicated to apply critical judgment to what one finds. Many of us feel, as Kegan (1994) put it, "in over our heads" as we strive to "balance" our life domains.

A long list of causes for these increased demands is easily found (Daly 2000; Niles, Herr, and Hartung 2001): technological advances; the changing nature of work, workplaces, and working relationships; international economic competition; the changing demographics of workers, families, and communities; and longer life spans, among others. Adults have always had roles and responsibilities as workers, family members, citizens, consumers, and community members. However, role expectations have changed. For example, workers now have increased responsibility for decision making, teamwork, and their own career development. Family responsibilities are complicated by single parenthood, blended families, longer-lived elders, and more women in the work force. Citizens must be informed not only about local and national issues but global ones as well. As consumers of health care, individuals are urged to inform themselves about treatment options and participate in decisions about their care.

These subjects comprise what Kegan (2000) calls "the hidden curriculum of adult life" (p. 45); in this curriculum, adult roles—parenting, partnering, working, and living in an increasingly diverse society—are "courses" in which we are enrolled. This ***Digest*** describes a selection of adult education approaches to helping individuals negotiate the curriculum of life challenges.

Beyond Life Skills

In the 1990s, work/life balance caught the attention of researchers, policymakers, and employers, resulting in the development of a range of employment benefits, legislation, and programs aimed at helping people cope. Life management or family/career management curricula emphasize coping through the development of skills in communication, interpersonal effectiveness, and money, time, stress, and household management (e.g., ***California Community Colleges*** 1998; Mathieson 1999). As Caproni (1997) notes, research, policy, and practice focused on work/life balance have raised important issues and brought about changes that have benefitted some families. However, these approaches are incomplete in several ways.

As Niles et al. (2001) point out, the usefulness of these types of responses benefits different segments of society differently. For the working poor, balancing work, nonwork, and life roles may be a luxury; they "are likely to be far more circumspect in how they can commit their resources to family needs" (p. 13). Caproni (1997) suggests that the discourse of work/life balance reflects bureaucratic values such as individualism, instrumentalism, goal focus, and achievement orientation. The framing of imbalance as a problem and balance as the desirable and achievable alternative suggests that there is an ideal and our attempts to live up to it are deficient. But who gets to define what work/life balance is? And are skill- and goal-oriented approaches adequate in dealing with the dynamic, unpredictable, and ambiguous nature of life?

Kegan (1994) suggests that they are not. The expectations of contemporary life demand "more than mere behavior, the acquisition of specific skills, or the mastery of particular knowledge. They make demands on our minds, on *how* we know" (p. 5). Adults need both informational and transformational learning (Kegan 2000). Learning about money, time, and stress management and becoming informed about flextime and childcare options are examples of informational learning related to work/life issues. Such learning is "aimed at increasing our fund of knowledge, at increasing our repertoire of skills, at extending already established cognitive capacities into new terrain" (p. 48). Transformational learning, on the other hand, seeks to change how we know, altering our existing frame of reference, our ways of making meaning.

To deal with life demands, adults need the skills, techniques, and behaviors for mastering the "hidden curriculum," but the more important goal of adult learning is fostering cognitive complexity (Kegan 1994). Tinberg and Weisberger (1998) provide an example of how educators can gain a sense of learners' current level of cognition and then facilitate the transitions to more complex levels:

> Through a sequence of reading and writing assignments, I wanted students to engage such questions as the following: What do I know? How do I know it? What schemes or taxonomies do I employ to order the world? What languages do I use to capture my experience? In essence, I was asking my students to define what, for lack of another phrase, I call "working knowledge," knowledge that we put to work in the world. I was asking them to achieve an awareness of how they know as well as what they know. (p. 8)

A supportive learning environment helps build the bridge to the next level (ibid.). Fishback and Polson (1998) also found that adults' cognitive development was facilitated by an environment that was dialogic, challenging, and supportive.

Several frameworks have been developed that acknowledge the cognitive challenges of contemporary life. Some are still theoretical, and evidence is just beginning to be gathered about their effectiveness. One example is the National Institute for Literacy's Equipped for the Future (EFF). EFF's framework of knowledge and skills that adults need is based on four broader integrative concepts (Merrifield 2000): (1) a purposeful, constructivist approach to learning; (2) education that is rooted in the context of people's lives; (3) emphasis on application of skills; and (4) a view of adult development as transformative rather than additive.

EFF identifies adults' key roles and responsibilities as citizens/community members, parents/family members, and workers. The 16 content standards for what adults need to know and be able to do to fulfill these roles are organized in 4 categories (Stein 2000):

- **Communication Skills**—read with understanding, convey ideas in writing, speak so others can understand, listen actively, observe critically
- **Decision-Making Skills**—solve problems and make decisions, plan, use math for problem solving and decision making
- **Interpersonal Skills**—cooperate with others, guide others, advocate and influence, resolve conflict and negotiate

- **Lifelong Learning Skills**—take responsibility for learning, learn through research, reflect and evaluate, use information and communications technology

EFF drew upon concepts of adult development formulated by Kegan and others that involve transforming ways of knowing: "A developmental approach to performance means it is seen not simply as mastering more and more knowledge and skills in a cumulative way, but as making conceptual leaps in understanding and viewing the world—as transformative more than additive" (Merrifield 2000, p. 12).

An Australian adult and continuing education curriculum framework (Bradshaw 1999) also takes a transformative approach. This framework contains eight lifelong learning goals that focus on higher-order thinking:

1. Understand complex systems that interact unpredictably
2. Identify and integrate existing and emerging personal, local, national, and global perspectives
3. Prosper with different paradoxical and multiple sets of realities
4. See and make connections between past, present, and future
5. Encourage sustainability in relationships and the environment
6. Engage in a process of change, privately, publicly, civically, and occupationally throughout life
7. Extend learning styles and repertoires
8. Develop insights through questioning

Underlying these goals are four key principles: multiplicity, connectedness, critical intelligence, and transformation. The curriculum recognizes the significant contribution of learning to the creation of personal and social futures. It is intended to provide "a solid foundation for a full and active life for the variety of roles we play" (ibid., p. 23).

"Balance" Is for Checkbooks

"Balance" of life roles may be an illusive pursuit and defining what it means is highly individual (Niles et al. 2001). Secretan (2000) asserts that it isn't balance that we need, but integration. Balance implies either/or, that investing in one role requires taking something away from another. "Creative people use their brains and deploy their gifts whenever and wherever they feel the urge….Balancing is what we do to our checkbooks; integration is the happy confluence and merging of all of the activities in our lives" (ibid., p. 29).

Working toward integration requires transforming our perspective about life roles. Transformative learning involves a questioning of assumptions and a fundamental rethinking of premises. Attempting to deal with conflicting life roles and the complexities of contemporary life certainly presents us with "disorienting dilemmas" that are often the starting point of perspective transformation (Imel 1998). Educators can support adults in integrating different ways of knowing—the cognitive, rational, and objective and the intuitive, imaginative, and subjective (ibid.)—because, as Kegan (1994) suggests, we need to draw deeply on both *what* we know and *how* we know in order to handle the demands of contemporary life.

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